

F.A. CUP heroes Wycombe Wanderers, outfought and outplayed for the first half, turned the tables on Merthyr Tydfil to run out 3-1 winners from Saturday's exciting fourth qualifying round clash at Loakes Park.

Anyone looking at the scoreline of this game would probably assume it was something of a cruise for Wycombe. Yet for the first 40 minutes it was anything but that — in fact had it not been for two super saves from John Maskell and a Keith Mead clearance off the line, Wanderers might well have been out of it there and then.

But thanks to Maskell they managed to hold out until the 37th minute when Merthyr deservedly scored. Wanderers hit back to level inside three minutes and then produced one of the most amazing turnarounds I have seen for a long time.

On the first half evidence, it seemed the Blues would struggle to get even a second bite at the cherry down in Wales on Tuesday afternoon. But a quick goal from Alan Phillips two minutes into the new half signalled the end for Merthyr who wilted visibly. When their goalkeeper Don Payne allowed an Ian Pearson free kick to slither under his body, it was the last straw. Merthyr gave up. All the early aggression and confidence was gone, drained away from them, and they finished as meek as lambs awaiting the slaughter. Their manager must have been heartbroken by the way they folded up towards the end.

Wycombe's problems were clear enough in the early stages. In front of the season's largest gate (2,100) the players looked hurried and nervous as Merthyr stamped an immediate authority on the game, especially in midfield.

Keeping to their word in playing attacking football, Merthyr menaced from the first whistle and Dylan Evans' fifth minute miss, when he drove over the top, looked to be expensive. For at the other end, the Welshmen's two big front runners were causing all sorts of problems. Mick Lenihan, similar to Alan Ives of Tooting in build and style, gave Alan Phillips the slip more times than the Blues No. 5 would care to remember while the burly Paul Caviel used his frame to good advantage against Mead. It must be said, however, that the Blues defence had to cope with ad-

ditional pressure due to the number of mistakes in front of them.

The crowd soon sensed Wycombe's frustrations and the danger from the visitors, especially when Lenihan ran through the defence after playing a 1-2 with Edwards. Maskell did well to palm the

Whatever manager Ted Powell said to his team at half time certainly did the trick, for Wanderers looked a new side — a side far too good for their Southern League Division One opponents. The mistakes became fewer and Wycombe were given a real boost in only the second minute of the new half.

Pearson was brought down by Terry Morgan, and not for the first time, just outside the box. Pearson took the free kick and sent in curling to the near post where Phillips rose beautifully to steer a perfect header into the corner. The goal worked wonders for Alan who played superbly for the rest of the game.

At this stage Merthyr were still dangerous with the long-haired Keiron Goggin buzzing around in midfield. But Gavin Fraser, ineffective in the first half, gradually gained the upper hand in midfield and turned the screw on the visitors. Dave Jones was booked for a foul on Pearson and from the free kick Wanderers scored the crucial goal that knocked all the stuffing out of Merthyr. Payne must have been unsighted from Pearson's cross-cum-shot which zipped under his body and rolled over the line in the 63rd minute.

Merthyr's heads went down after Payne's tragic error and Wanderers showed little sympathy to the Welshmen. Instead they hammered them into the ground with some lovely attacking football. Now they had both time and space to build and had their finishing matched their approach work they would have ended up 6-1 winners. Howard Kennedy, Pearson and Evans all went close as the Blues pounded away for goals.

Merthyr, tiring by the second, could do nothing about the situation and never troubled Maskell again.

John Priestley came on for the last few minutes, during which time Pearson missed an open goal. A cross came over from the left and Ian tried to volley first time when he had the space to bring down the ball and choose his spot.

In the end that miss hardly mattered as Wanderers eased through the dying seconds. Yes, 3-1 looks impressive — but those of us at Loakes Park know it could have all been very different.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, A. Phillips, R. Davies; H. Kennedy, G. Fraser, M. Hollifield; I. Pearson, D. Evans, A. Horseman (sub J. Priestley 84 mins).

MERTHYR: D. Payne; J. Phillips, T. Morgan, D. Jones, C. Holvey; K. Goggin, G. Davies, A. Sullivan; P. Caviel, M. Lenihan, P. Edwards (sub P. Murphy 78 mins).

Referee: M. Bevan (Melksham).
Half-time: 1-1. **Goalscorers:** Wycombe — Hollifield (40), Phillips (47), Pearson (63). Merthyr — Davies (37).
Attendance: 2,100.

Wycombe Wanderers 3, Merthyr Tydfil 1



Report by Stuart Earp

shot down and the ball was eventually bundled away.

The goalkeeper produced an even better save in the 17th minute when Caviel flicked on a free kick to Lenihan, who found himself in acres of space inside the box. It seemed he must score but Maskell fingertipped the shot just past the post.

A misdirected header by Phillips almost put Lenihan through again and it seemed the Wycombe net was leading a charmed life when Paul Birdseye miscued a clearance and Lenihan drove in a shot for goal that beat Maskell. Only the covering of Mead saved the day when he cleared off the line.

Under constant pressure in midfield, Wanderers could find little in reply. Pearson had a couple of shots taken by Payne but with poor service from midfield, the front runners had a lean time. At the back, Wanderers looked too suspect, especially Bob Davies, who was given a torrid time by Edwards.

There is no disputing that Merthyr deserved their 37th minute lead. Gordon Davies slotted home at the far post after Caviel crossed with Wycombe far too slow to clear the danger. But three minutes later the Blues hit back when Mick Hollifield took the ball past two defenders and into the box. A 1-2 with Pearson gave him a shooting chance and Mick drove the ball past Payne.